

Miracle Enough

MIRACLE ENOUGH

Papers on the Works of Mervyn Peake

Edited by
G. Peter Winington

Introduced by
William Gray

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In memory of
SEBASTIAN PEAKE
1940-2012

“To live at all is miracle enough”
—Mervyn Peake

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The lines by Robert Graves quoted in Katherine Langrish's paper are printed by permission of the Carcanet Press.

Alison Eldred very kindly scanned the portrait of Cecil Collins for John Vernon Lord's essay and supplied scans of two Peake illustrations for Francesca Bell's.

INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM GRAY

TO MARK THE CENTENARY of Mervyn Peake's birth on 9 July 1911, the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy organized an international conference entitled "Mervyn Peake and the Fantasy Tradition" at the University of Chichester. It ran from 15 to 17 July 2011, with accompanying exhibitions of Peake's illustrations in the Pallant House and Otter galleries in Chichester. The Sussex Centre seeks to engage with folklore, fairy-tale and fantasy studies at an international level, yet also to maintain its local roots in Sussex. Mervyn Peake's centenary was therefore an important occasion for the Centre, since it celebrated works of fantasy (literary, dramatic and visual) that have not only an international reputation and appeal, but also a very local connection. Peake lived at different times in the villages of Wepham and Burpham, both just down the road from Chichester, and close to Arundel (whose famous castle has a much debated relationship to Peake's *Gormenghast*). Peake is buried beside his wife, Maeve Gilmore, and his parents in Burpham churchyard.

The family connection was strong from the start of preparations for the conference, which was organized by the then Sussex Centre assistant, Dr Jane Carroll, with the assistance of Peter Winnington who was particularly involved in drawing up the conference programme. From early days Mervyn Peake's son Sebastian travelled to Chichester with Alison Eldred to see at first hand the preparations for an event that was clearly of importance to him. If truth be told, as time went by, the main aim of the conference seemed to become not so much to make an "impact" in terms of the approaching Research Excellence Framework, or even just to break even financially, but rather (as Jane and I used to joke) to make Sebastian happy. We hoped that we had come

somewhere near that when on the first day of the conference we overheard Sebastian, standing outside to get mobile reception, summoning other members of the Peake clan to Chichester. As many participants commented afterwards, there was a very special atmosphere at this conference, which was made up not only of lovers of Mervyn Peake's works of visual, literary and dramatic art, but also of the members of the Peake family who joined us. Sebastian's contribution was, in hindsight, poignant. He gave a fascinating and very personal talk about significant times and places in his father's (and his own) life. I have a vivid memory of sitting with him and Jane in the George at Burpham (which he remembered as being very different in his boyhood) after we had done some filming for BBC South Today, and Sebastian waxed lyrical about the importance of that little bit of Sussex in his father's imaginative life.

Sadly we do not have Sebastian's talk as part of this book; nor, for that matter, do we have some of the other memorable talks and presentations which were either more extempore (by Joanne Harris and Stuart Olesker, for example) or not suitable for presentation in book form (Brian Sibley's presentation of his version of the Titus books for radio). However, we hope that this selection of papers from the conference will bring a flavour of a unique event that was poignant, memorable and above all enjoyable.

The collection begins with the presentation that opened the conference, Peter Winnington's "Peake and Alice (and Arrietty)". The title is consciously modelled on that of Peake's radio talk about his Alice illustrations entitled "Alice and Tenniel and Me". As Winnington notes, this is another example of the kind of "borrowing" that is the theme of his paper: as writers we are always "borrowers". It is therefore ironical that the model for Peake's *Alice* illustrations was Caroline Norton, daughter of his Chelsea neighbour Mary Norton, whose classic children's fantasy novel *The Borrowers* was published in 1952, shortly before Peake's *Alice* was first published in Britain. Arrietty is the teenage daughter of the Borrower family, and it is her adventures that comprise much of the series. Winnington brilliantly explores the multiple echoes (conscious and unconscious) of Lewis Carroll's work in Peake's. In what Winnington terms "the happy convergence of congenial minds", Peake and Carroll share similar pre-occupations – "with identity, solitude, language and meaning". Winnington continues: "This is why Peake's drawings for *Alice* match Carroll's text so harmoniously. He

was not just a highly skilled artist with ‘the power to slide into another man’s soul’ – he definitely shared qualities with Carroll.”

More than 35 years (or half a biblical life-span) after he included a chapter on Mervyn Peake in his ground-breaking *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (1975), Colin Manlove offers in “Shaping in *Titus Groan*” a fine-grained interpretation of Peake’s masterpiece. Manlove begins with a close reading of the first two sentences of *Titus Groan*, revealing the idea of “shaping reality”, which is, he argues, “a leitmotif of the whole book”. Manlove traces the myriad forms which this idea takes, from the art works of the Bright Carvers to the dead tree roots painted in different colours by the mad twins Cora and Clarice in the Room of Roots to the artifices and manipulations of Steerpike. However, all this “shaping” and “artifice” has an ulterior motive of some kind or another, Manlove suggests: it is always *for* something else. By contrast, Manlove argues, Peake’s own shaping art is *free*. If it is for anything, it is to “canalize [Peake’s] chaos. To pour it out through the gutters of Gormenghast. To make ... worlds on their own.” The delight expressed in Peake’s art is indiscriminate, reflecting his sense that “to live at all is miracle enough”.

In his paper “The Keda Mystery” Pierre François focuses on the figure and fate of Keda, conscripted from the outer dwellings of Gormenghast to be Titus’s wet nurse, mother of the Thing, cause and witness of the fight to the death of two Bright Carvers, and eventual suicide. According to François, most previous critics have tended to either ignore or deprecate this apparently melodramatic strand in Peake’s Titus books, seeing it as clichéd and portentous. François, however, wants to build on Winnington’s discerning of a mystical dimension to the Keda episode. “Mystery” is the operative term here, for François relates the Keda episode to the ancient mysteries (or “mystery religions”, for example the cult of Demeter at Eleusis) where truth is revealed to the initiate within the experience of dramatized ritual). More specifically François invokes the figure of the Great Mother in his interpretation of the Keda episode, and introduces Carl Jung’s insights, especially in *Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype*. In the experience of oneness with the all, François claims, all the usual binary oppositions which help us order our experience are overcome, so that even to call Keda’s mystical suicide a moment of transcendence is misleading because it is also an experience of extreme immanence; and it is not just a moment, it is also all moments. Such coincidence of

opposites is characteristic of mystical experience, and baffling to non-initiates (technically “the profane”) whether they be characters (such as Flay, who witnesses Keda’s suicide from a great distance) or critics.

One of the several papers which gave careful attention to the title of the conference, “Mervyn Peake and the Fantasy Tradition”, was Joe Young’s “But Are they Fantasy? Categorizing the Titus novels.” Young notes the reluctance of critics to use the term “fantasy” because it appears tainted by so-called “genre fantasy”. “Fantasy” is also very hard to define. One well-known attempt was Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, published in English in 1973, which presented an exhaustive study of “the fantastic” understood as the moment of hesitation between what Todorov calls “the uncanny” (when the apparently supernatural is explained rationally) and the “the marvellous” (when the magic is real). However, this definition hardly fits most of what we generally call fantasy, nor does it apply, as Young points out, to the Titus books, including *Titus Alone*. Young then takes the bold step of recuperating Tolkien’s definition of fantasy in “On Fairy-Stories” and applying it to the Titus books. This he does with considerable care, imagination, subtlety and (in the present writer’s view) success. Examining Peake’s work in the perspective of the fantasy tradition, as defined by Tolkien and in the manner Young does, turns out to be a game very much worth the candle.

The relation between Mervyn Peake and “the Fantasy Tradition” is also at the heart of Farah Mendlesohn’s piece “Peake and the Fuzzy Set of Fantasy: some informal thoughts”. Confessedly a “confection” or thought experiment rather than a rigorous argument (though she still “partially believes” in it as such), Mendlesohn’s imaginary history of fantasy literature rewrites conventional accounts, particularly Brian Attebery’s, and places Peake’s work at the centre rather than on the debatable margins of the “fuzzy set” of fantasy literature. But this re-writing of the history of fantasy literature isn’t so far-fetched, she argues, for it’s only a matter of historical accident that we are accustomed to read the history of fantasy literature through the lens of the Tolkien/Lewis tradition. Mendlesohn sees Attebery’s “construction” of the genre of fantasy as precisely that, and sets out to deconstruct it and reveal it as a “critical sleight of hand”. Mendlesohn’s alternative history of fantasy literature both for children and adults starts from the premise that if we presuppose that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Lord of the Rings* are normative, then the evidence will of

course appear to confirm this presupposition. But *The Hobbit* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* were *not at all* normative when they first appeared; they only appear so in hindsight. What actually appeared as “fantasy” before the impact of Tolkien and Lewis was actually much more like Peake’s work, especially the Titus books, Mendlesohn argues, and she adduces a wealth of intriguing examples to support her ostensibly hypothetical case.

In her paper “Algorithm of Disenchantment: anti-genre effect in the Titus books” Larisa Prokhorova is also concerned with the notoriously ill fit of Peake’s Titus books within the genre of “fantasy”. She addresses this issue by introducing the Russian tradition of genre theory, including Propp, Tynianov and especially Bakhtin (and for once these theorists appear in the references in the original Russian). The reading process depends fundamentally on what Bakhtin called “genre memory”, for, Prokhorova says, “according to [Bakhtin] genres always contain durable elements of archaic character which are constantly renewed, making genre old and new at the same time”. “Genre culture” is fundamental to both the writing and the reading process. However, there is also the idea of “anti-genre” or “genre modification” which subverts the structure of genre by introducing new or oxymoronic elements that render the genre both familiar and unfamiliar. This can help explain the curious effect of Peake’s writing, according to Prokhorova, who invokes the concept of the “anti-tale” which subverts the genre expectations of the fairy tale. Thus Peake’s Titus books both feel and don’t feel like fantasy. They play with certain genre expectations which are continually destabilized and subverted; so, for example, Gothic elements are clearly present in Peake’s Titus books, yet the latter can never be contained within the Gothic (or indeed any other) genre. As Prokhorova concludes, after a thoughtful reading of the Titus books, “Peake’s alternative fantastic world with its realistic elements incites cognitive dissonance and interpretive hesitation.”

Through “(In)visible Black Holes: aporias in the Titus books” Irene Martyniuk argues that while worlds of fantasy often require aporias – originary myths that would necessitate too much page space or background to explain – other stories stand out on account of their blank spaces. One such exception to the rule, according to Martyniuk, is Peake’s Titus trilogy. Most readers have a satisfying experience with the novels by ignoring the blank spaces of the text, but she argues that, once noticed, these aporias challenge the reader in exciting ways and tie

Peake's work to earlier texts, especially *Wuthering Heights*. For example, Steerpike emerges from Swelter's kitchen, but his previous life, including his parentage and upbringing, is never discussed – even by him. As Steerpike develops as a character, Martyniuk contends that he becomes an heir to Emily Brontë's Heathcliff – the anti-hero with the missing past. She explores similar aporias such as Gertrude's parentage and, in the same vein, the missing possibilities of an appropriate lover/husband for Fuchsia. Finally, who is Titus meant to marry? According to Martyniuk these blank spaces eventually become black holes, forcing characters to collapse and then deconstruct – much like the Castle itself. Martyniuk sees here the influence of *Wuthering Heights* and similar examples of what she calls “aporia-driven texts”.

Simon Eckstein's “‘There's No Place Like Home’: reflective nostalgia in *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*” presents Steerpike, the Faustian anti-hero of *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*, as the most ostensibly *modern* character in Peake's novels. Steerpike also resembles K., the central protagonist of Kafka's *The Castle*, embodying the individual emancipation and social mobility that are characteristic of a distinctly modern subjectivity alienated from its surroundings. Like K., Steerpike, the Faustian Gothic anti-hero, is a monstrous parody of the modern Western subject, a man detached from the milieu of his birth, setting his own values, and attempting to exercise (and forge anew) his individual rights. But if K. and Steerpike are essentially modern subjects, their tenacious and determined attempts to infiltrate the hierarchies of essentially feudal systems appear somewhat puzzling. Their seemingly incongruous decision to pursue acceptance and power within each castle's respective hierarchy prompts the question: why do these modern subjects so stubbornly seek admission to such conservative communities? This paper considers their attempts as responses to the modern condition. More specifically, it explores Steerpike's narrative arc in relation to the German *Heimat* discourse that Elizabeth Boa identifies as a central presence in Kafka's *The Castle*, and assesses how far Peake's engagement with this discourse might be understood as an implicitly modernist critique of both traditional and contemporary notions of modernity, community, and the prospect of an idealized return to that which has been culturally lost.

Matthew Sangster's “Peake and Vulnerability” discusses Peake's particular talent for humanizing the figures he depicts by rendering them vulnerable in the eyes of his readers and viewers. Sangster begins

by examining Peake's introduction to his book of *Drawings* alongside writings by William Blake to demonstrate that while Peake wholeheartedly subscribes to the idea of the heroic creative artist, he values art most highly for its ability to connect with others and express humanity – “art is the voice of man, naked, militant and unashamed,” as he puts it. Sangster focuses particularly on passages from the first two *Titus* books where Peake uses narrative time and carefully modulated free indirect discourse to both reveal characters to the reader and hold something of them back, to make them human both through exposing their complexities and through refusing to over-interpret their actions. While many of Peake's characters are outwardly grotesque or express themselves through grotesquery, in most cases their outward seemings are shown to hide complex minds and emotions, compelling portraits of loneliness, discontent and ambivalence made particularly poignant by Peake's facility for portraying miscommunication. Sangster concludes by discussing Steerpike, whose failures of empathy trip him up despite his talent for identifying and taking advantage of vulnerabilities in others. While Steerpike has style, it is not really his own – his mimicry, dishonesty, and failure to use his eloquence to reveal his self make him destructive rather than creative. He lacks Peake's generosity with regard to human weakness, which makes him curiously vulnerable.

In “There is Nowhere Else: architecture and space in the *Titus* books” the novelist Edward Carey (whose imagination has affinities with Peake's) discusses how the characters fit the architecture and the architecture fits the characters, how the stone of Gormenghast creates the tone of the first two books and provides the novels with their extraordinary structure. The castle is too large to be seen; we encounter it room by room, but never comprehend it whole. It is of course dead, according to Carey, yet also somehow monstrously alive, and utterly dominates the lives of its denizens. Carey casts his net widely in search of analogies for the Gormenghast effect, including both architecture (Ceausescu's mad People's Palace in Romania and the Forbidden City in Beijing) and literature (Beckett's *Happy Days* and Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*). He notes how as we move from *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* to *Titus Alone* the mood changes from claustrophobia to agoraphobia. There is no relief, no meaning; in the end, for Carey, Gormenghast coincides with mortality itself.

In “Mervyn Peake, the Poet of Gormenghast” R. W. Maslen, editor of Peake's *Collected Poems* and (with Peter Winnington) of Peake's

Complete Nonsense, focuses on the roles played by poetry, and especially nonsense verse, in the Titus books. Peake's prose is itself often close to poetry, Maslen points out, and at crucial points approximates to the rhythm of iambic pentameter, or blank verse. Verse figures prominently in the first two Titus books, though its role differs in each. In *Titus Groan* verse appears as a private pleasure, a defence against meaningless ritual (thus mirroring Peake's own life in the early 1940s when writing was considered part of Peake's therapy at the time of his "break-down"). In *Gormenghast*, verse has moved into the public sphere, and has become an integral part of the castle's rituals. Although after his epic climb to Fuchsia's attic the exhausted and disorientated Steerpike experiences a brief moment of truth as he gazes at the illustrated book of poems – it is open at "Sensitive, seldom, and sad" – Maslen shows how Steerpike subsequently reverts to his more manipulative self and subverts the liberating potential of nonsense, reducing it to one more tool in his arsenal for dominating his world (that is, Gormenghast).

Sophie Aymes-Stokes in "Eccentricity in Mervyn Peake's work" examines an underlying motif in Peake's work, exploring its expression in both textual and pictorial modes. She focuses on two "minor" books: *Letters from a Lost Uncle* (1948) and *Figures of Speech* (1954), which for her epitomize the legacy of two cultural products central to the discourse on eccentricity: eccentric biography and nonsense – and the images that accompany them. She cites Victoria Carroll's presentation in *Science and Eccentricity* of nineteenth-century eccentrics as "boundary figures" transgressing and/or negotiating boundaries (of gender, the generic conventions of scientific works, or the taxonomy of animal species). Peake demonstrates an acute awareness of how these boundaries threaten the body, identity, and rational discourse. His book of nonsense and his epistolary mock travel-book reflect the need to delimit and/or undermine taxonomies and to create new singularities. "Nonsense", Peake said in the radio talk "Alice and Tenniel and Me", "swims, plunges, cavorts, and rises in its own element. It's a fabulous fowl" – just the sort of creature that leads explorer/naturalists such as the eponymous Lost Uncle to embark on new expeditions. These two "minor" books shed light on Peake's larger works of fiction and on the closed environments in which eccentrics thrive in their isolation and obsession. The inhabitants of Gormenghast are characterized by extreme singularity and self-sufficiency. As what James Gregory calls "extreme signifiers of identity", they partly account for Peake's eccen-

tric place in the literary canon as a constant challenge to critical classification.

Eschewing any claim to read children's literature from a theoretical perspective (and proving herself no mean caricaturist with her cartoons of "hermeneuts" interpreting and "aporias" agonizing), acclaimed children's fantasy writer Katherine Langrish seeks in her paper, "Exchanging Certainty for Uncertainty: Mervyn Peake explores the realms of children's fiction" to recapture the experience of reading as a child. Children can be sensitive and intelligent readers, she says, "but their response is different from an adult's: immediate and emotional". Therefore what she offers is "a personal, and emotional response" to Peake's children's work, in particular to *Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor* and *Letters from a Lost Uncle*. The latter she encountered and loved as a child, but not the former, which would probably have been too much for her, she thinks, since it explodes the kind of certainties that she as a child needed, for example the certainty that heroes should be heroes and villains, villains – Slaughterboard after all gets off scot-free. Despite her eschewal of "horrible" theoretical terms, what Langrish in effect offers, after an insightful comparison of Tenniel's and Peake's *Alice* illustrations (with Peake emerging as much more attuned to the dark and dangerous aspect of Carroll's work), is a fascinating inter-textual reading of Peake's children's books against some classics of the genre: *Treasure Island*, *The Coral Island*, *The Gorilla Hunters* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Peake's children's stories contain what is best in the tradition: "colour, drama and delight." Langrish's message is that these works by Peake are *meant* for children, and should be given to, and (even better) read with, children.

In "The Imagination at Work: a study of the drawings in the Titus manuscripts" Zoë Wilcox shows how Mervyn Peake used drawings of characters in his manuscripts (acquired by the British Library in 2010) to imagine how they look and speak. Through cataloguing this archive, Wilcox has discovered that Peake drew a small number of the Gormenghast characters repeatedly, yet others hardly at all. Arguably Peake inhabited some of his characters so completely that he did not need to draw them. For those that he failed to see adequately in his mind's eye, he turned to drawing as a method of discovery, depicting some in great detail and others less so. This paper considers what Peake's working drawings (or lack of them) tell us about his imaginative process, and how this differs for particular characters. This reveals how detailed

visual representations of particular characters, with all the extra information they carry compared to a mental picture, might affect how these characters are realized in Peake's writing. While the frequently drawn, detailed depictions of the Prunesquallors, Flay, Swelter and the Professors helped Peake to produce full-rounded characters, the sketchier depictions of Titus (and to a lesser extent Steerpike) betray their less coherent psychological motivations. Photographs of the manuscripts show the different types of working drawings that Peake made, their physical position in the text and the apparent effect of these drawings on subsequent passages of writing, as additions and revisions to the manuscripts.

Francesca Bell's "The Fleeting Line: Mervyn Peake and fairy tale" begins with Peake's words in *The Craft of the Lead Pencil* (published in 1946, the same year as *Titus Groan*): "drawing should be an attempt to hold back from the brink of oblivion some fleeting line or rhythm, some mood, some shape or structure suddenly perceived, imaginary or visual." Bell examines illustrations from selected tales ("The Goose-girl", "Jorinda and Joringel", "The Three Spinners", "Our Lady's Child", "Cat and Mouse in Partnership") to discover how Peake achieved this goal. Her perspective on Peake's creative methods is that of a professional illustrator, fascinated by Peake's ability to "subordinate" himself totally to the book, and "slide into another man's soul." The paper contains some brief biographical elements, centring around Peake's unconventional childhood and its influence on his relationship to fairy tales and fantasy; however, it mainly comprises imaginative readings of Peake's illustrations, often attending to easily overlooked details which show how Peake manages to "hold back from the brink of oblivion" images in fairy tales which are otherwise subliminal. The paper illustrates how Peake's images lead the reader into a deeper creative involvement with the tales, and suggest previously unrecognized insights into their meaning. Peake's work, Bell concludes, exemplifies how illustrations may complement literature and provide a different mode of critical exegesis, offering complex psychological insights which underlie the surface simplicity of tales and illustrations alike.

In his paper "A Tutorial with Mervyn Peake", artist and illustrator John Vernon Lord offers the reader a privileged insight into the atmosphere of the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London in the early 1960s when Peake taught in what was then called the "School of Drawing, Painting and Modelling". Lord recreates the kind of tutorial

Peake used to conduct and recalls what Peake said to him during the meetings they had together in the Fine Art studios at the Central. Lord's memories of Peake's comments are supplemented by extracts from Peake's writings, such as *The Craft of the Lead Pencil*, which become all the more penetrating and vivid by being placed back in the living context of Peake's teaching career. The period covered was a time when the deleterious effects of Peake's illness were becoming evident, for example in the illustrations done for the Folio Society edition of Balzac's *Droll Stories*, sadly not Peake's best work as an illustrator. But according to Lord, Peake's advice was always incisive, and different from that of the other tutors, "probing to the essential heart of a painting or a drawing", as Lord puts it, using the words of Peake's widow Maeve Gilmore in her 1970 memoir *A World Away*. This perceptiveness underlies Peake's famous recommendation to illustrators to develop "above all things the power to slide into another man's soul". Lord's paper addresses Peake's main concerns as a teacher and discusses its difference from the kind of teaching typical of this period, with a growing division between "fine art" and "mere illustration". Lord offers his first-hand experience of the personality, work and approach of Peake and of some other tutors of the time.

Prudence Chamberlain of Blackshaw Theatre writes in "Adapting *Titus Groan*: creating the 'sublime character' through collaborative writing" about the numerous problems of adapting *Titus Groan* for the theatre, particularly with regard to the novel's vast architectural scope. How can a book, so firmly located within a Gothic tradition characterized by the evocation of "the sublime", be transferred to the physical limitations of any kind of stage? Chamberlain's paper explores the ways in which collaborative writing enabled a new text to emerge that conveys the sublimity of Peake's work, especially through the idea of "the human sublime". Ronald Paulson in his essay "Versions of the Human Sublime" has posited that characters can evoke the same kind of responses as natural landscapes, eliciting awe or fear from those who behold them. In their reworking of *Titus Groan* for the stage, Blackshaw's writers aimed to make Peake's characters cause reactions similar to those produced by nature, with Swelter's vast bulk and murderous intentions creating fear, or Lord Groan's descent into madness evoking futile despair. The paper also discusses the idea of "Gormenghast" figuring as a character in the context of a collaborative playwriting process. Since the size of the castle cannot translate directly into the

physical limitations of a theatrical space, the place must be evoked through dialogue and narration, inviting the audience to acknowledge the castle as an overwhelming presence, steeped in tradition, rather than as merely a setting for action. Sourdust was assigned a crucial role here, becoming a kind of vocalization of the castle's character, its aches, pains and hopes for Titus's future.

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PEAKE AND *ALICE* (AND ARRIETTY)

G. PETER WINNINGTON

MERVYN PEAKE AND FANTASY.¹ What an enormous topic! It's hard to know where to begin when Peake was so prolific in his creativity. There's not just the Titus books (for which he is best known); there are also his plays, his poetry, his nonsense verse, his paintings and drawings, and his illustrations to classics like *The Hunting of the Snark* and *Alice in Wonderland*. So I have decided to open this conference by showing, through theme and form in Peake's poetry, prose and illustrations,² how affinities between him and Lewis Carroll made him so admirably suited to illustrating *Alice in Wonderland*.

Before I go any further, though, I'm sure you are curious to know about the "Arrietty" in the title of this talk. So let's begin with her. *Arrietty* is the title of the latest animated film adaptation of *The Borrowers*, one of the great children's fantasy books of the twentieth century. It's about little people who live under the floors of our houses and subsist by borrowing (as they call it) from us. Arrietty is the main protagonist in the story, and she is not much older than Alice.

When Peake was invited to draw new illustrations for *Alice* by a Swedish publisher in the spring of 1945, he was living in Chelsea. Close by lived a family with several children; to Peake's eye, the little girl – Caroline – would be just right as a model for Alice. He had known the Nortons since the beginning of the war, so there was no problem about getting her mother's permission for Caroline to sit for him.

1 The conference was titled "Mervyn Peake and the Fantasy Tradition."

2 I'm drawing on some of the themes and motifs in Peake's work that I identified and examined in *The Voice of the Heart: the working of Mervyn Peake's imagination*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2006.

The Norton family had been based in Portugal for many years, but they were caught in England by the outbreak of war. In 1940 they decided (like so many people who were free to do so) to cross the Atlantic to the safer shores of America. Before they left, Peake asked Mrs Norton if she would try to get some of his poetry published in the United States, and he gave her a sheaf of poems in typescript. I expect she *did* approach a publisher or two, but nothing came of it. On the other hand, she began writing on her own account, starting with a book for children which was published as *The Magic Bed Knob* in 1943.

That was the year the family returned to Chelsea – to buzz bombs and blackout. Mrs Norton continued writing, first a sequel to *The Magic Bed Knob* and then a book that was to propel her to the forefront of children's writers: *The Borrowers*. It was published in 1952 (winning the Carnegie Medal for that year), shortly before Peake's *Alice* was published in Britain for the first time.

So the young Caroline who sat for Peake's Alice was the daughter of "Borrower" Mary Norton. What a fantastic coincidence! In choosing her as his model, Peake unwittingly linked the most famous nineteenth-century fantasy about a little girl's adventures underground with the most famous twentieth-century fantasy about another little girl's adventures beneath the floorboards.

Of course we may wonder what *The Borrowers* owes to *Alice*. Carroll's story has become so much part and parcel of our childhood – indeed, our culture – that its effect is largely subliminal. The same question may be asked of *Titus Groan*; its characters (Lord and Lady Groan, the mad twin sisters, and their attendants – Flay, Prunesquallor and Nannie Slagg) could all have stepped out of Wonderland. Indeed the absurd logic of their very existence is most Carrollian. Like Wonderland, Gormenghast was conceived without an overall plan; it expands and fresh features appear, serve their purpose and are cast aside as a function of the vagaries of Peake's imagination and the requirements of his story as it unfolds. The difference is that Carroll (being interested in the logic of it all) draws attention to the variability of time and space in Wonderland; Peake (being an artist and not bothered in the least by such things) does not. Gormenghast is like Wonderland too in that familiar features of the everyday world are subtly changed in a dream-like manner and subverted to make it a quite different place altogether. As Peake said himself, *Titus Groan* is – and is not – a dream (Winnington 2009: 213). These are the foundations of fantasy.

Within the respective worlds of Gormenghast and Wonderland, we have a young protagonist striving to make sense of that world by defining who they are. The people around them have their own ideas about it – but both Titus and Alice have a sense of self that makes them reject the social role assigned them. By the end of *Gormenghast* Titus has decided that he can only affirm his separate identity by renouncing his title and leaving the castle. Then he discovers how hard it is to define himself in another world, closer to our reality, that makes no reference to Gormenghast.

Like Titus in the foreign country, Alice keeps defining herself in Wonderland by referring back to who she was in the world above ground, wondering, for example, “Was I the same when I got up this morning?” And she repeats, “Who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle!” Here she is echoing Tristram Shandy. When asked who he is, he famously replies, “Don’t puzzle me!” (Sterne 1765: chapter 33). Was Carroll aware of borrowing from Laurence Sterne? I asked the greatest Carroll expert I know, Selwyn Goodacre. He thinks it was unconscious. Carroll was writing a hundred years after Sterne, and (so far as I can tell) Tristram Shandy’s exclamation was something of a catch phrase by then.

Incidentally, the latest film adaptation of *Alice* by Tim Burton enlarges on this theme of identity, bringing Carroll’s story closer to Peake’s. Just like Titus, Burton’s Alice finds that her behaviour is historically predetermined. She is not merely expected but *obliged* to slay the Jabberwocky (and she does it with a sword, just as Titus kills the dreadful White Lamb in *Boy in Darkness*). Likewise, killing Steerpike turns Titus into a dragon-slaying hero in the eyes of the castle: “Steerpike had become an almost legendary monster – but here, alive and breathing, was the young Earl who had fought him in the ivy. Here was the dragon-slayer” (1950: 503; 505). This gives him the self-confidence to turn his back on the castle and ride out into another world. It’s the same for Burton’s Alice. In *his* version, she is old enough to fall down the rabbit hole on the day of her engagement party, and her experiences in Wonderland give her the self-confidence to reject the fiancé that the world above ground wishes to impose on her. Like Titus, she chooses instead to go out into the world (to the Far East, of all places, going in the opposite direction to the young Mervyn Peake).

An aspect of identity, in both Peake and Carroll, is the notion of balance or equipoise. In Peake it is typified by the image of the razor’s edge,

and embodied by the Coupée that joins the two halves of the island of Sark. Just as his paintings and drawings seek a balance “between the passion and the intellect, between the compulsive and the architectonic” in order to achieve “that thing called ‘style’” (1949: 239) so too do some, at least, of Peake’s characters. Steerpike, in particular, aspires to style and aims to keep his mind “balanced in an equipoise between the intuitive, and rational reasoning” (1946: 185; 132). Ultimately he fails, succumbing to an irresistible desire to crow. In the Titus books mental balance, lost most obviously by Lord Groan, often parallels physical balance, lost so tragically by his depressed daughter Fuchsia on her windowsill, even though she had previously been capable of standing “for a dozen of seconds at a time in some extraordinary position of balance” (1946: 72; 49). The Thing topples from a similar ledge, and even Swelter is tipped over the edge of the roof by Flay and Lord Groan. In short, practically everyone in Gormenghast is unbalanced at some point or other – mentally, physically, or both. Even Keda. And her suicide is echoed in *Titus Alone* by Muzzlehatch: unhinged by the killing of the animals in his zoo, he contemplates throwing himself off a cliff. In the end, though, he sends his car into the abyss instead, with his pet monkey in his place at the wheel. It’s a rare moment of last minute recovery in Peake.

Balance is a key motif in Wonderland. After all, Alice’s adventures begin when she inadvertently overbalances and falls down the rabbit hole. Thereafter she keeps on meeting people who are mentally and/or physically unbalanced, from the Mad Hatter to the White Knight, not forgetting Humpty Dumpty, of course, who is by definition in unstable balance on his wall.

These parallels suggest a certain similarity in what Carroll and then Peake were doing, or thinking. In fact, there are moments when Peake seems to have been taking a page out of Carroll’s book. There’s the old philosopher who makes such an enigmatic appearance early in *Gormenghast*. He is characterized from the first by his apparent lack of balance, for he “leaned forward in space as though weighing on the phantom handle of an invisible stick. It was a wonder he did not fall on his face” (73; 424). And his philosophy is equally unbalanced. He’s an idealist, claiming that nothing in this world is real; all pain is imaginary. For him, only in “Death’s amazing kingdom” (76; 425) will sensations be real. Ironically, this provokes an angry young man who sets fire to the old man’s beard, causing him immense pain and, a few days later,

his death. After this, the incendiary young man vanishes not just from the castle but from the story as well (another of those puzzling aporias in Peake).

This episode seems rather pointless. But turn to *Through the Looking-glass*, and read the chapter about Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. They represent the same school of thought as Peake's old philosopher: Bishop Berkeley's idealism. So I wonder if Peake was deliberately borrowing from Looking-glass Land at this point. As philosophical allusions are rare in his work, it seems a distinct possibility.

Let's move on to something more down to earth: animals. The works of both Peake and Carroll are characterized by encounters with animals, especially odd ones. Carroll's creations, all the way from the Cheshire Cat to the hookah-smoking Caterpillar, are so familiar that they have entered our everyday language. Who thinks of Carroll when using the expression, "grinning like a Cheshire Cat"? Peake's depictions of Carroll's inventions are wonderfully apt because he paid so much attention to animals, and not just the cats that he and his wife always had. In the 1930s he used to go to London Zoo to study and draw them. Animals feature in all his stories (particularly *Boy in Darkness*) and in his nonsense poems. In his play *Noah's Ark*, he brought a wide range of animals onto the stage. Along with Noah and his family, they are the sole survivors of the flood, which puts animals and humans on an equal footing.

Throughout his work, Peake blurs the distinction between human and animal, steadily undermining our sense of what is human. In *Titus Groan*, Prunesquallor asks, "Are you an animal, Mrs Slagg? I repeat 'Are you an animal?'" (73; 50). Both of Peake's major characters outside the Titus books acquire an anthropomorphic animal partner: the Yellow Creature for Captain Slaughterboard, and a turtle servant, Jackson, for the Lost Uncle. These animal partners occupy the ill-defined fictional terrain of the therianthrope, situated between the human and the animal; in particular they do not speak. Whereas Jackson is definitely a turtle and never says a word, the Yellow Creature is more ambiguous; parrot-like it imitates the pirates and says "Yo-ho." In the Titus books, Peake hints that the Thing might have served as an animal partner for Titus, only she is definitely human, and has simply never learned to speak. She's a feral creature that lives in the woods around Gormenghast, preying on other animals. Peake gives her the gracile physical characteristics of the animal sculptures that the Bright

Carvers create. So Titus's perception of her fluctuates, seeing first the animal, then the girl, and back to animal again: his "conception of the Thing" is "flung from one side of his mind to the other, so that he hardly knew whether she was a frog, a snake, or a gazelle" (1950: 418; 683).

A word about talking animals. They are quite familiar to anyone brought up with children's books in English. Alice, on the other hand, had not had the pleasure of reading *The Wind in the Willows* (to give just one example) and so she is surprised that all the creatures she meets in Wonderland are capable of speech. In Peake's work, animals are endowed with speech only in his nonsense poems, especially *Rhymes Without Reason*, and in his play, *Noah's Ark*, which he wrote for children to perform. This suggests that for him the Titus books were not of the same kind of fantasy as his other works – or Carroll's *Alice*.

Paired animals and humans occasion some of Peake's most memorable illustrations. In *Rhymes without Reason* we have the Jailor and the Jaguar. I have already suggested (in "Parodies and Poetical Allusions") that Peake's lines about them owe more than a little to Carroll's poem about the Walrus and the Carpenter. The respective verses are identical in rhythm and form, and in Peake's illustration the Jailor and Jaguar are "walking close at hand" on a beach. Although they are not weeping "like anything" as the Walrus and the Carpenter are, the rain is pouring down instead, providing a metaphorical substitute for tears. Again we may wonder if Peake was aware of how close he was to Carroll here.

Metamorphosis, changing from one species to another, is a major theme of fantasy literature. In *Boy in Darkness*, Titus narrowly escapes being turned into an animal. More famously, Carroll turns the baby that the Duchess throws out of the cottage into Alice's arms ... into a pig. Alice puts it on the ground and watches it happily trot off into the wood. And she's pleased with this: "If it had grown up," she says to herself in Chapter



1. The Jailor and the Jaguar